

Wham bam thank you 'Nam

The sets were destroyed by typhoons. The leading man had a heart attack. And real corpses were used as props.

War may be hell, but the making of *Apocalypse Now* was not far behind...

story by PAUL CULLUM and
GEORGE HICKENLOOPER

In March 1976 Francis Ford Coppola entered the Philippines jungle with the intention of making a lucrative action-thriller about the Vietnam War. When he emerged, over a year later, the director had a leading man so sick he had been given the last rites, a reputation for megalomania unrivalled in film history, and personal debts of \$16m. What he did not have was an action-thriller about the Vietnam War. He had a film that, in his own words, was the Vietnam War.

But if the production of *Apocalypse Now* was cataclysmically disastrous, then there is no doubt that it could have been worse. In the late '60s, when film school graduates George Lucas and John Milius originally conceived the idea of updating Conrad's novel *Heart Of Darkness*, they intended to make the film in Vietnam itself while the war was still going on. After studio executives declined to put up the money, however, the project languished for half a decade until Coppola – still shattered from the gruelling *Godfather II* shoot – decided that Milius' script would provide the perfect opportunity to make some quick cash.

Securing the original \$12 million budget through foreign pre-sales, Coppola set out for the Philippines, seemingly the perfect location to film this tale of an army assassin sent upriver to kill a crazed AWOL colonel. Within the first week the director had sacked lead actor Harvey Keitel and replaced him with Martin Sheen. Shortly afterwards a typhoon destroyed all of Coppola's sets, forcing the entire production to shut down. Soon the US press caught the scent of blood and labelled him a deranged madman, while even his closest advisors, including wife and official production chronicler Eleanor, began to think that he had lost control. This suspicion was apparently confirmed when the arrival of a vastly overweight Brando, hired at massive expense to play the unhinged Colonel Kurtz, prompted the admission from Coppola that he had no idea how the film was going to end. By the time *Apocalypse Now* was finally completed, the budget had ballooned to \$31m and Coppola appeared to be ruined. He wasn't. He had created the greatest war film ever made. But it was not an experience that anyone – not least the director – would ever forget: "The way we made it was very much like the way the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, we had access to too much money. And, little by little, we went insane." →



Now Voyager: Martin Sheen falls for the old trick-soap gag in *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

dramatis personae

The people who pushed the boat out to make *Apocalypse Now*



directed Robin Williams kiddie vehicle *Jack*.

FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA (Director/co-writer) Multiple Oscar-winner and Godfather of New Hollywood. Followed *Apocalypse Now* with financially disastrous *One From The Heart*. Recently



JOHN MILIUS (Co-writer) Right-wing armaments aficionado and director (*Big Wednesday*, *Conan The Barbarian*).

GEORGE LUCAS (Original director) Multimillionaire recluse and longtime Coppola associate.

ELEANOR COPPOLA (Director's wife/diarist) Directed 16mm location interviews on which *Apocalypse Now* documentary *Hearts Of Darkness* was based. Subsequently published *Notes*, her *Apocalypse* diaries.



MARLON BRANDO (Actor) Lardy Method genius who received \$1m for playing the part of demented AWOL American army chief Kurtz.



MARTIN SHEEN (Actor) Hired by Coppola in an airport lounge to replace Harvey Keitel in lead role of Lt Willard. Father of Charlie and Emilio.

HARVEY KEITEL (Actor) Cast as Willard on the advice of Martin Scorsese, then fired after one week. Will next be in *City Of Industry*.



DENNIS HOPPER (Actor) Hollywood phoenix who played Brando's photo journalist aide. Recently completed Abel Ferrara's *Blackout*.



LAURENCE FISHBURNE (Actor) Cast in first role as 17-year-old Vietnam grunt at age 14. Forthcoming films: *Hoodlum* and Brit sci-fi movie *Event Horizon*.

FREDERIC FORREST (Actor) Role of Chef led to leads in *Hammett* and *One From The Heart*, both produced by Coppola's ill-fated American Zoetrope Studio.

MICHAEL HERR (Voiceover narration author) Prizewinning war correspondent and author of classic Vietnam tome *Dispatches*. Worked on Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*.

GRAY FREDERICKSON (Producer) Responsible for logistics of location set.

DEAN TAVOULARIS (Production designer) Veteran Coppola collaborator.

John Milius: The original idea started at cinema school. George Lucas and I were great connoisseurs of the Vietnam War. We would talk about the battles all the time and what a great movie it would make.

George Lucas: At the time, I was working on an idea to do a student film about a soldier doing hand-to-hand combat with a P51 Mustang. And it was out of those conversations that we developed *Apocalypse Now* in terms of what it became.

John Milius: We were going to make *Apocalypse Now* for \$1.5 million in Vietnam. We got all these connections; we got people who were generals in the Air Force, and people who were going to help us get around. I remember all these guys around Francis at the time who were hippies and extreme political radicals – they all wanted to go make this movie. They wanted to go to Vietnam without any protection whatsoever and hop around through the minefields. It came pretty close, but then the studio started saying, "Why are we sending these hippies over there? They're a bunch of nuts. Some of them will be killed. There's a real war over there." So they stopped us. I mean, this was a time when there were riots in the streets about the war, and a studio executive is the last person who's going to want to get involved in the middle of that. Hollywood isn't exactly known for its social courage.

Eleanor Coppola: The Godfather films were so engrossed in intra-family problems, in dark rooms. Francis just wanted to do some light action-adventure film. He'd do it fast, make a lot of money and sell the rights around the world.

Francis Ford Coppola: I thought it'd be fun to take a good screenplay and make a film without having to go through all of the anguish and horrors I had suffered during the production of both Godfathers. But it was crazy. I think you can see it in the film. As it goes up the river, you can see the director and actors going a little crazy.

Gray Frederickson: The Filipino pilots would show up with the helicopters, take off and disappear over the horizon. And we'd say, "Where are they going?" "They did it, they're going home." "But we have to do another take!" We were outfitting their helicopters so they could fly well enough to be in our movie, and as soon as we would get them fixed up, they'd send them down to fight the communists. Francis was screaming one time, "I'm tired of paying off this general and not getting anything for it!" And the general was standing right there with all the soldiers and everybody listening to him ranting and raving. I could go on for hours like this.

Francis Ford Coppola: (Willard) had to be an observer, a watcher. A totally introspective character. In no way could he get in the way of the audience's view of what was happening – of Vietnam. That wasn't going to work with Keitel:



"I NEARLY DIED... I SAID, 'GET ME A PRIEST.' AND HE CAME AROUND AND GAVE ME THE LAST RITES"

martin sheen

his stock-in-trade is a series of tics – ways to make people look at him.

Harvey Keitel: I was the only person there who knew how to handle the jungle – I was the only one who had ever been in the Marines. I don't think we communicated well. We clashed. It was a matter of a young actor who was an ex-Marine out of Brooklyn meeting up with a talented director who was out of UCLA and some fraternity.

Laurence Fishburne: The way I hear it, Harvey wanted to go back to Manila every day with Francis. And I guess Francis wasn't having it. So, you know, they gave Harvey the boot.

Francis Ford Coppola: Firing my lead actor – that was bad. It's a terrible thing to do. Sure, it jeopardises the production, but it can also ruin an actor's career, to be fired like that. It was a very, very hard decision. But I just pulled the plunger – I did that a lot.

Harvey Keitel: If I have one god in my life, it's not going to be Francis Coppola... Had I known then what I know now, I would have kept my mouth shut longer and had them shoot so much they couldn't fire me.

Martin Sheen: Making that film was an ordeal, not just physically but emotionally. I was staying in this hotel, and right outside was all this poverty. Pigs running around, children without teeth.

Gray Frederickson: The typhoon wiped us out. Destroyed all the sets. We had to shut down. The country was flooded, swamped; everything was under water. That was kind of a nightmare.

Laurence Fishburne: The set was, like, 80 per cent demolished, you know. It was like mud up

Gray Frederickson: One day we heard the helicopter starting and Francis was in the pilot seat by himself. And he took off in the helicopter. He had learned to fly it every day going back and forth between Manila and the set... Everybody went crazy because Francis was a bit over-the-edge at this point. I got a little upset on that, figuring out how I was going to explain it to the insurance.

Dean Tavoularis: I was trapped for days in a house with the Playmate of the Year, who had been flown out to appear in the show sequence. She didn't want to live in a hotel, so I took her to this little basement room and told her there was just the one room because three or four of us were already crammed into the place. We sat around, and it started raining harder and harder until finally it was literally white outside, and all the trees were bent at 45 degrees. A writer from the *New York Times* happened to be trapped there with us, along with my brother, my nephew, my driver, and a toothless old man who lived permanently in the house. The writer, Jonathan Reynolds, later wrote a play, *Geniuses*, about a kind of chauvinistic art director trapped with a Playmate.

Frederic Forrest: Francis was going to fly us to the location. That was great. We don't know how well he knows how to fly. But he says, "You wanna go with me? C'mon, we'll go to the location."

Laurence Fishburne: But the scary part was that because of the hurricane, we had to fly along the coastline 100 or so feet off the ground. If he didn't fly that way, we were doomed.

Frederic Forrest: So Larry Fishburne and I are riding with him, and he's talking to the driver, they're having some kind of discussion about the fucking helicopter. And Larry and I keep looking at this tree keeps getting closer and closer, and finally, at the last second, we went right over the top of it. Larry's eyes got about *this* big around. He said, "Thank you, Mr Coppola, from now on I think we'll find our own way to the location."

Laurence Fishburne: I cried, man. I thought I was gonna die.

Gray Frederickson: I remember that Marty Sheen and his wife Janet called me one time and said, "The sanitation on that set of the Kurtz compound is getting rank." They put a lot of dead animals there – rats, chickens and things – and it was really just a festering pit. Dean

Tavoularis, the production designer, wanted it to feel real to the actors. But Marty said, "I can't work with this; somebody's going to catch some kind of disease." Flies buzzing, dead animals stinking. So we tried to get it cleaned up the best we could. But it was never perfect.

Francis Ford Coppola: People confused the enthusiasm and the sincerity of what I was doing with megalomania.

Gray Frederickson: I remember Tavoularis joking around that they were going to get some real bodies in there, and I didn't believe them; I didn't think it would happen. I went to the set one day, and the prop man said, "Come over here, let me show you something." And I went back in a little tent behind the mess tent, and there were a bunch of bodies on the ground, covered with tarpaulins. And they were preserved in formaldehyde or something. I said, "You can't do that! We can't have that, it's crazy! You can't have real dead bodies. Where did they come from?" And he said, "Oh, well, we found a guy who supplies them to the local medical schools – they use them for cadavers."

Word went around for a while, then all of a sudden it got to the military and they checked on the guy who got them, and it turned out that he didn't supply them. He was just some guy who robbed graves and brought them there. So then they came back and started an investigation. They took our passports away from us. They said, "How do we know you didn't kill these people?"

Dean Tavoularis: It became such a low level in my life that somehow putting blood on staircases and rolling heads down steps seemed natural to me.

Gray Frederickson: We had a lot of close calls with little airplanes. One time we were in a storm. Radar wasn't working. And the little Filipino pilot was kicking the dashboard with his foot trying to get the radar to go on. Lightning flashing all around. Once in a while in a break in the clouds you could see the mountain whizzing past us. We weren't even above the mountains, we were flying through a pass.

Eleanor Coppola: I sent a telex to Francis telling him that because I loved him, I would tell him what no-one else was willing to say, that he was setting up his own Vietnam with his supply lines of wine and steaks and air conditioners – creating the very situation he was there to expose. That with his staff of hundreds of people carrying out his every request, he was turning into Kurtz – going too far.

Francis Ford Coppola: I became like Kurtz because I became very cosy in this little place, and began to be more obsessed with the details of life that touched me. So I would send home and say I'd like a certain type of glass sent over. It wasn't steaks and air conditioners. My feeling was that if I had to be in this jungle situation, it would be nice to have the glass that I like.

John Milius: They brought me back to put the script back together, and everybody said, "Thank God, this will be alright now, this is a new day." They said, "Go in there and tell him he's been crazy" – all this kind of stuff. And I felt like Von Rundstedt going to see Hitler in 1944, and I was going to be telling him there was no more gasoline on the Eastern Front, and the whole thing was going to fold. And I came out an hour and a half later, and he had convinced me that this was the first film that would win the Nobel →



to the knees and we're gonna shoot this scene where the PBR rolls up to this MEDIVAC area.

Frederic Forrest: [Rock promoter] Bill Graham had just arrived, I think with the Playboy Bunnies [brought in to play troop entertainers in the MEDIVAC scene]. We're making conversation; we don't want to tell them how horrible it is, you know? So we're trying to be polite and have drinks, and he says, "Do you always have these strong winds?" We said, "Well, this is a little stronger today." Phew! Fucking tree would go flying by the window.

Prize. And so I came out of the room like Von Rundstedt: "Ve can vin! Ve don't need gasoline!"

Francis Ford Coppola: Marlon arrived; he was terribly fat. He hadn't read the copy of *Heart Of Darkness* I'd sent him. Yet Marlon has one of the finest minds around – thinking is what he does. To sit and talk with him about life and death – he'll sit and talk about that stuff all night long.

Marlon Brando: I wrote Kurtz's speeches, including a monologue at his death that must have been 45 minutes long. It was probably the closest I've ever come to getting lost in a part, and one of the best scenes I've ever played, because I really had to hold myself under control. I made it up extemporaneously, bringing up images like a snail crawling along the edge of a razor. I was hysterical. Francis shot it twice – two 45-minute improvisations – but used hardly any of the footage in the picture.

Dennis Hopper: I think Brando was responsible for me having a part in *Apocalypse Now*. I think that it challenged him in a way, about certain personal things; that he felt it was important for me to have an opportunity to work. I had no part in *Apocalypse* really – only a guarantee that I'd have one line with Brando. That was my contract.

Francis Ford Coppola: I could fly a helicopter and I lived in a volcano and my life was becoming like a story. Then, like all good things, it was too much. And then Marty had the heart attack.

Eleanor Coppola: Francis called from Manila. He said that Marty had had a heart attack – he was alive but in critical condition. He said that the situation should be kept a total secret until they knew more about Marty's condition and had decided what to do.

Martin Sheen: I nearly died... I crawled to the side of the road and propped myself up and waited. A public bus stopped and loaded me in. I made myself stay awake because I was sure if I lost consciousness I wouldn't come back. Then the wardrobe van passed and I was loaded into it. We drove to the production office. A doctor came in and he looked real worried. I just said, "Get me a priest."

And he came around and gave me the last rites. I completely fell apart. I turned completely grey – my eyes, my beard – all grey. I was in intensive care. Janet slept on the floor beside me. Around 6am, I awoke and the bed was shaking, and I thought Janet was just fooling around, but it was an earthquake. I thought, "Oh God, I've survived all this to die in an earthquake."

But no-one put a gun to my head and forced me to be there. I was there because I had a big ego and wanted to be in a Coppola film.

Francis Ford Coppola: We were there a year and a quarter – but you must remember that many things happened there. It was like a great movie. We were destroyed by storms, people had heart attacks, people got divorced, we built whole villages – it was like an expeditionary force. For me, after a while in the heat of the jungle I started to like it, because there's something really honest about the jungle.

John Milius: I remember one conversation clearly. We were flying back in his airplane, this turboprop plane – him being a mogul, and all this money either at risk or he was already in debt for – and him saying, "This will be the first film to win the Nobel Prize." And he said, "If I die, you'll finish it. And if you die, George will

finish it. And if George dies – what do you think about Ken Russell?"

Michael Herr: They were back from the Philippines for a year when they called me. They came back with something like a million feet of film and no movie and sat around completely wiped out, trying to piece it together.

John Milius: I remember when Francis' daughter was seven years old and they asked her at school, "What does your father do?" She replied, "He makes *Apocalypse Now*."

Michael Herr: They gave a screening the night I arrived. They sort of used my arrival as a ceremonial pretext to show what was – as I recall it – almost a six-hour cut of *Apocalypse Now*.

John Milius: The first time he ever showed the movie to us, it was this great thing where we went up there to San Francisco, and he had Billy Wilder with him. And Billy Wilder was sitting next to me, and Francis says, "We've got everybody here, and we've got Billy Wilder because none of the rest of us know what we're doing." And it just knocked Billy Wilder out. He couldn't get over it. He went on and on about how great it was. We knew from that moment on that everything was OK. We knew that if they excoriated us or imprisoned us in writer's prison or what have you, we could still say, "Fuck you, I made *Apocalypse Now*."

Eleanor Coppola: In the spring of 1979, it was shown at the Cannes Film Festival, and won the Palme d'Or grand prize. Francis was very frustrated by the obsessive press coverage of budget overages and the problems surrounding the production; he had hoped that the attention would be focused on the finished film. When *Apocalypse* was released later that year it drew a large audience, was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won two. The film earned over \$150m worldwide.

John Milius: I think Francis looks back on this as his great accomplishment. All the veterans look back on *Apocalypse* exactly as veterans look back on a war: they're proud to have served and survived. When they released the documentary *Hearts Of Darkness*, we all got together, and everybody'd



Hanoi and her resisters: The *Apocalypse Now* production team oversee another ill-starred barbecue fiasco

The odd Coppola: Francis belatedly informs Robert Duvall and Martin Sheen that Friday is Mufti Day



"FRANCIS SAID, 'IF I DIE, YOU'LL FINISH IT. AND IF YOU DIE, GEORGE WILL FINISH IT. AND IF GEORGE DIES – WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT KEN RUSSELL?'"

john milius

Martin Sheen: The thing I love about Francis most is that he never asked you to do anything he wouldn't do. He was right there with us, lived in the shit and mud up to his ass, suffered the same diseases, ate the same food. I don't think he realises how tough he is to work for. God, is he tough. But I will sail with that sonofabitch anytime...

John Milius: You know, Francis can convince me of anything. Francis is still my *fürher*. And I use the term intentionally, because in all my reading about Hitler, I'm convinced that Hitler has never been portrayed correctly. Because he had to be like Francis – he could get anybody to do anything. So Francis can go to Cannes and hog all the credit, and when I call him on it, he says, "Well, I got in front of the press and I couldn't help myself." And I forgive him for it. Because Francis has greatness in him.

Coppola: My film is not a movie; it's not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. ☐

gotten older, and some had gotten pretty nice old, and some had died. We were pretty much like old Vietnam veterans – there was no difference.

TIME CAPSULE: 1980

Ronald Reagan beat peanut king Jimmy Carter in the US election, John Lennon was shot down in the street by Mark Chapman and Chinese scientists succeeded in cloning a fish. But what was shaking Hollywood's tree as Francis Coppola pushed Martin Sheen over the edge?

charts

Top five at the UK box office for January 12, 1980



1. *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Coppola)
Pricey Conrad adaptation.



2. *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Terry Jones)
Graham Chapman stumbles down road to Calvary in Church-baiting satire.



3. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise)
USS Enterprise crew boldly go in search of a plot in first big-screen venture.



4. *The Black Hole* (Gary Nelson)
Lame Ernest Borgnine-starring Disney attempt to capture attention of *Star Wars* generation.



5. *Yanks* (John Schlesinger)
GI Richard Gere is overpaid, oversexed and over here in WWII romance.

And the Top 20 for the year:



1. *The Empire Strikes Back*
2. *Kramer Vs Kramer*
3. *Star Trek – The Motion Picture*



4. *Monty Python's Life of Brian*
5. *Airplane!*
6. 10



7. *Escape From Alcatraz*
8. *The Black Hole*
9. *The Shining*
10. *Apocalypse Now*



11. *The Amityville Horror*
12. *McVicar*
13. *Last Feelings*



14. *Yanks*
15. *Friday The 13th*
16. *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*
17. *The Aristocats*
18. *The Bermuda Triangle*
19. *The Wanderers*
20. *Breaking Glass*

in production

What ill-conceived fiascos were limping their way towards the clapperboard in 1980?

Carry On Down Under, the first *Carry On* to be filmed outside the UK, is scheduled to start shooting with Kenneth Williams, Hattie Jacques and Barbara Windsor... Two separate biopics of painters are planned – Al Pacino will play Amadeo Modigliano, while Marlon Brando is to take the part of Pablo Picasso... **John Huston** is set to direct *Annie* and wants Sean Connery to shave his head and play *Daddy Warbucks*... EMI have struck a \$9 million deal to produce the film of *Evita*. Barbra Streisand will play Evita Peron with David Essex as Che Guevara... **ABC TV** are planning a reworking of *Oscar Wilde's Picture Of Dorian Gray*, titled *Dorian's Portrait*, with *Mia Farrow* taking the lead... Both Peter Cook and Dudley Moore are being wooed to take over the role of Inspector Clouseau following the death of Peter Sellers...

reviews

But what was it really like?

While it seems to me to be ultimately broken-backed both as a statement about Vietnam and a Conradian argument about moral choice and the human soul, Coppola's grandiose epic, viewed purely as film, remains obstinately intact. On a gut level at least, it is something of a masterpiece.
Derek Malcolm, *The Guardian*, 11/12/79

I was captivated by the sheer bizarre, while remaining unconvinced by the psychological, political and mythical thrust.

PHILIP FRENCH, *THE OBSERVER*, 16/12/79

Kurtz's city is Tarzan's magic island; Kurtz is no more than a sort of Wizard of Oz; and the film is lost. Kurtz's portentously mumbled musings, his readings from *The Hollow Men*, his bibliography, obligingly illustrated (Fraser's *Golden Bough*; *The Waste Land*; Jesse Weston's *From Ritual To Romance*) diminish everything to an embarrassing supermarket philosophy.
DAVID ROBINSON, *THE TIMES*, 14/12/79